

Robins' Eggs

(Winter • Spring • Summer • Fall • 1957)

Rico Conejo used his remaining strength to trudge through the snow. The vapor cloud forced from his nose and mouth gave way to a jagged blast of cold that stabbed at his throat and lungs every time he breathed in. His heavy coat slowed his pace and its crimson hood flapped up and down while he plowed forward through the frozen mass; his leg muscles strained as he pulled a back boot out of the deep snow, only to plunge it swiftly into the fresh mound ahead. Although the temperature around him was well below zero and the cold air continued to scrape his lungs, he felt uncomfortably hot and clammy, his skin sticking to his underwear. He could hear Seth White's breath just behind him and felt fingers fumbling to grasp the edge of his hood. Exhausted, Rico almost surrendered to snow and defeat. But this Seth White menace at his back drove him to speed up his pace until he reached the embankment ledge.

He leaped over the brink. For just a moment the ice crystals that coated every surface stopped crackling and the crisp grey sky supported him on a wing of exhilaration. His small gloved hand met the familiar steel rods of the overpass that stretched across the train tracks yards below. He swung forward to the second support bar and then the next, as he had done so many times over the summer, until he landed on the opposite embankment.

Safely on the other side, Rico could hear, through his frostbitten ears, Seth's frustrated scream snap across the iciness, breaking the silence and filling the landscape with an angry echo.

Rico wanted to gulp the air through his opened mouth, but his throat wouldn't tolerate further thrashing. Instead, he sipped the chill through his nose in carefully measured streams.

"This isn't over, you little spic." Seth's voice reverberated across the thin dry air. "I'll clock you, sooner or later." Seth was twelve, but only in the 5th grade, having been held back two years.

Rico shouted over the railway gully, "Sticks and stones will break my bones..." and a delayed echo followed, "But names will never hurt ... never hurt." He had recently heard that jingle, but this was his first opportunity to use it with satisfaction. Born in the Caribbean, he had immigrated with his parents, five years ago, to this cold place. Now he was ten years old and in the fourth grade. This strange culture had forced itself upon him. He had no choice but to suck most things in through a straw of his own making. It was through this straw he had quickly absorbed the difficult new language, English. But he had needed a greater skill set and commitment to navigate the long Canadian winters and outspoken prejudice.

He saw Seth sliding down the embankment on his back and awkwardly bang the rails with his boot heels. At first, believing Seth had accidentally lost his footing on the icy mound, Rico was about to laugh. But when he saw him rise in a shroud of powdered snow and hop over the tracks toward him, he knew the slick move had been intentional.

Thoroughly out of breath, Rico couldn't budge from his spot even though he wanted to bolt. As Seth raced up the snowbank in front of him, Rico could see the fury in his eyes, teeth clenched with

gathering rage. The nostrils of his hawkish nose flared and frightened Rico. Seth's bare hand, white-knuckled and purple-fleshed, flew up to grab his throat, intending to drag him back down the embankment. But Rico reflexively shifted his weight from his front leg to his back leg, driving an extra foot of distance between them. Not expecting this, Seth overreached and lost his balance, sliding on his belly to the bottom of the snowbank and smacking the rails with his boot toes. Now Rico laughed.

Having regained his second wind, Rico spun on his heels and took off. He jumped over a few fences effortlessly before crouching in some stranger's yard to hide quietly and catch his breath. He felt safe now, exhaling with a cocky confidence. All summer had been an exercise in dexterity: running down the tracks and back alleys; leaping over fences, using only one hand for leverage; hopping from one rooftop to the next, exalted by this dangerous folly. That's when Rico had first spotted the robins' nest.

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Every year, in late spring or early summer, Miss May offered the neighborhood kids access to her cherry tree's copious harvest. Although she lived alone, she was anything but lonely, and through her daily interaction with the neighbors, maintained a generous heart. The tree branches expanded into the sky like a green umbrella. When their time was up, blossoms dropped in a mantle of pink petals; later, the juicy cherries would fall from the tree to decorate the alley and surrounding yards in red stains. During the cherry season the kids arrived with their parents and a large shopping bag and politely took turns filling up—one bag for each family. There was always enough to go around.

Soon after the sweet harvest, two robins showed up to build their nest. The larger of the two birds had a bold, rusty chest that occasionally flashed fire-red in the summer sun the way Rico's coloring pencil streaked across the page of his sketch pad. He watched from a rooftop, enchanted, as the robins assembled their fortress of twigs. They darted back and forth carrying heavy, twisted sticks in their beaks, defying the laws of gravity with the same magical composure that Horus, the bird-headed god of Egypt, had used to build the pyramids, stone by stone. His friend Jane from school, who was always reading, had introduced him to the Egyptians.

Once the nest was complete, the birds settled down and the smaller one began to roost inside the cozy structure for long periods of time. One day, when both birds were away, he climbed up the tree for a closer look. As soon as he spotted the blue eggs clustered in the nest like painted wedding almonds, his heart began to pound in a strange way and racing through him was a brand new sensation he could only describe as *mysterious*.

While he perched on a delicate branch, he thought about Jane; she used that word often. *Mysterious*. He asked her what it meant. At first she had responded impatiently. But when her voice soon filled with enthusiasm, Rico knew he had asked her another smart question. He liked smart girls.

“Mysterious means, *new* and *fun*.” She paused, then added with relish, “But sometimes it can be a little *scary*.”

Below him, his feet tingled on the wavering limb.

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He sat now in this desolate yard, his back against a tall wooden fence, beginning to feel the coldness bite through his snowsuit, wondering what happened to Seth and how long he needed to wait before heading off to school. He didn't want to be late again. Through the early morning stillness he could hear the electricity crackling within the high voltage wires that ran along the train tracks.

He thought about Jane a lot these days. He was grateful to her. In the fall, she had helped him come up with the plot for a puppet show he would perform as his class project. And just this morning he had a strange dream about her. In the dream, he and Jane were talking on the street corner in front of the schoolyard. But he couldn't remember the exact words she used. Around them, the night's freshly fallen snow, unblemished by even a single footprint, stretched forever in all directions as white as Santa's beard. Without explanation Jane slipped and fell face first into this flawless field. When Rico helped her to her feet, he noticed she'd left behind the imprint of her full body—a beautiful ghostly image—pressed into the virgin powder. Where her knees had landed he saw an indented patch of deep red like a cherry snow cone in reverse. Then he observed she had torn her burgundy stockings at the knee and she was bleeding and the blood dripped into the snow. He awoke deeply disturbed; the dream had been as real as his tangled comforter and the radiator hissing in the corner, spilling its oppressive heat into his bedroom.

The fence shook violently against his spine, jerking him back to reality. Looking up to the top of the wooden slats, he almost peed in his pants when he saw Seth's eyes, wide and furious, beaming down on him like search lights through a fog. In a heartbeat Rico was on his feet racing across the yard to the opposite wall. He scaled it effortlessly. But before scrambling down the other side, he looked with confidence over his shoulder. Seth was still struggling to lift the weight of his heavy body over the fence. Rico smiled, assured now he had gained a safe margin of distance. Although he had a solid build, twice Rico's bulk, Seth was muscle bound and a slow moving clod on his feet. Rico hopped a few more fences, then retraced his route back over the railroad tracks toward school.

Along the way he looked up into the sky and saw a diffused sun cast its light everywhere, as if it were the solitary eye that governed over the Pharaohs in the Land of the Dead. Gliding along, a lone marsh hawk criss-crossed the sun's path in repeating arcs. When Rico saw the school at a distance, he smiled again.

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Discovering the robins' nest that summer initially gave Rico great joy. But it all ended one sad day. When he first told the other kids about the candy-blue eggs, they begged to see the treasure. So he presided over the tree as tour guide. He would help the younger kids climb up to look inside the nest or would carefully remove one egg at a time, showcasing it between thumb and index to gasps of amazement from the open-mouthed fledglings lined up at the foot of the tree to watch the spectacle.

Early one morning, steadfast in his excitement to see the eggs, Rico dressed quickly, double-tied his red sneakers, and raced over to Miss May's tree. She stood at its base surrounded by a circle of kids, all in a solemn mood, staring at the ground.

They pointed to a spot at the center of their circle. At first, not knowing what to look for, he only saw the cherry-stained grass. But slowly he began to notice pieces of blue shell stuck here and there between the grass blades; and then a yellow and transparent goo; and then the alarming realization, when he saw a tiny beak and a little bird body, skeleton exposed and dreadfully dead, that all the eggs were smashed. His ribs tighten around his heart as he heard what happened.

Miss May and the kids said they had spotted Seth White climbing the tree and then running up the alley, laughing.

"Who's Seth White?" Rico asked.

Miss May spoke using her seriously deep voice, which meant she was about to reveal an important piece of news. "Seth White is a very bad boy."

"And he just got out of reform school," all the kids piped in at once using seriously squeaky voices.

Rico was angry at this *Seth White* kid for the rest of the summer. Whenever his handmade wooden sword struck the desired target—a telephone pole or an abandoned tire—it was always Seth he saw in his imagination. When school started in September, the first thing Rico did was visit the principal's office and fire up the tale of his summer tragedy, under an egg scramble of sobs.

A few days later a large older boy he'd never met before approached him on the school steps and lifted him off the ground by his shirt lapels. The kid's disheveled crop of red hair reminded Rico of feathers on a rooster's neck after a cock fight, back in his old country. "Did you tell the principal I smashed the robins' eggs?" Rico stared in shock and silence at an angry face with a crooked nose flaring inches away. "You did, didn't you, you puny rat. You little fink. I can see the egg on your face. I learned a lot in reform school. I can spot a squealing stooge before he opens his mouth."

He lowered Rico to the ground with a steel-toed boot to the shins. The pain shot straight up Rico's spine directly into his brain, where it lodged forcefully as a silent scream.

“Don’t ever rat to the principal or the law.” He emphasized the words *principal* and *law* through his clenched teeth. “I’m still on probation and now you’ve made my life hell. Next time I’ll clip both shins.”

That’s how Rico met Seth.

Over the next week, Rico’s shin developed an abscess, which turned into an infection that his stepmother had to treat with antibiotics. But he didn’t fink after that. He didn’t wish to make the same mistake twice, so he never told his parents or the principal how it happened. He did tell his neighbor Giuseppe, who was in the seventh grade. That’s when the race wars started—Giuseppe and his Sicilian paisanos against Seth and his Caucasian cronies. They met after school in the vacant lot by the train tracks. Rico watched from the sidelines with his friend Mario.

That day, sticks and stones did break some bones ... and names hurt like hell.

“It’s the wops against the rednecks,” Mario said, laughing.

The stones and dirt clods flew back and forth in a horizontal hail storm. Then the two armies clashed, greeting each other’s fury with fist and foot. Many bloody noses stained the field that day, the way the cherries had stained the alley over the summer.

From then on, Rico was fearless around Seth. Now he was special and important, hanging out daily with Giuseppe and the older seventh grade boys, trying to understand the strange topic of their conversations—car engines and girls. The following day, when he saw Seth walk past sporting a large black eye, he jumped out from the shadows of his tall new friends directly into Seth’s path and shouted, “Hey, Reform School Flunky.” Seth turned around and took a step toward him, but Rico quickly retreated, disappearing into the grove of protectors. Unaccompanied and vulnerable, Seth backed down. But as the days unfolded, Rico needed to watch his back. Once, Seth snuck up from behind when Rico was talking to Mario and would have swooped down on him if Rico hadn’t seen Mario’s eyes grow wide and a long shadow with a crook-beaked head engulf them. He skidded away at the last minute and outran Seth all the way home.

The end of each school day became a new challenge for Rico. He would leave the schoolyard from a different gate to create subterfuge and gain a prudent head start. But predictably, every time he thought he had eluded Seth, Rico would look over his shoulder to spot, at a great distance and in full pursuit, his nemesis, a dim figure through the winter light, preceded by a hawk-headed shadow. *Scary*.

And just the previous day it took Rico two hours dodging Seth to get home. His parents were alarmed. “Rico, *qué susto*,” his stepmother said, kissing the crucifix on her rosary. His dad always wore a wide leather belt. When he saw his dad’s fingers tapping impatiently on the belt buckle, Rico quickly fibbed, “Mom, Dad, I was playing with Mario. Making clay puppets for my puppet show.” His dad stopped tapping and wagged his finger at Rico. “Don’t do it again.”

A rewarding exhaustion accompanied him whenever he reached the safety of home knowing he had managed to evade Seth another day by the ingenuity of his own speed and wit. Yet, he frequently worried about the *next* time. Sure enough, earlier that morning his egg-smashing persecutor had arrived at school before him and waited, undeterred by the cold, outside the gate. That's how Rico had fled over the tracks to escape Seth's clockwork hammer.

But slowly things began to change in Rico's mind as he continued to learn more about Seth from the other kids. "Seth lives with his dad up the street from me," Mario said. "His dad is a drunk. He beats Seth up whenever he's boozing. That's why Mrs. White left. He beat her up too. One time this summer we were so tired after playing hide and seek all day, we sat on Mr. White's broken wall. Mr. White stepped onto his lawn with his mean German Shepherd. That dog is scary. Last year it got loose from its chain and chased me down the alley and bit six teeth holes into my butt. I couldn't sit down for a week." Mario rubbed his bottom with a painful expression. "My mom thinks Mr. White leaves his dog out in the rain and snow and beats it so it'll turn mean. So it'll bite Italians and other foreigners.

"Mr. White is a big man." Mario stretched his fingers high over his head to demonstrate the size and scale of the man. "He stood on his lawn looking down on us ... his dog growled next to him. His arms were folded across his chest and we could smell the beer on his breath while he yelled at us. 'Get off my wall you dirty little wops. You're the reason my wall's fallin' apart. I don't want any more bricks breakin' loose cause you little stinkers keep sittin' on it.' Behind Mr. White, Seth walked out of the house with bruises on his arms. He stood there on the porch looking very sad. My mom says that's why Seth is such a mean boy."

At that moment Rico's heart had a sadness in it. He understood. He hated Mr. White for beating up Seth. It wasn't fair.

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By the time he had circled back, all was quiet. He could see the main entrance to the school with its palatial doors, guarded on either side by a stone Phoenix. He never used that entrance, preferring the more homely side gates. The schoolyard was empty, the street vacant of parents and cars, which meant the morning bell had already rung. Late again. He hoped Mrs. March, his fourth grade teacher, wouldn't call the principal as she had twice before. Rico seemed to follow a pattern.

He had failed the first grade for serial tardiness and frequent lack of attendance, assisted by an unwitting collaboration from his parents, who failed to heed the principal's warnings. His mom had died

in childbirth and his dad had soon after remarried. At the onset of the first grade, Rico's stepmother would accompany him; she tried to impress upon him how easy it was to manage the straight and narrow route to school. That lasted a week. After that she expected him to make the daily trek by himself. "*Niño valiente*. You're a big boy now, Rico. You don't need me to show you the way. Be brave."

But at six years old such a burden of responsibility encouraged a monumental detour into alternative realities. On the way to school, he chased butterflies through uncharted alleys; he admired the black squirrels as they shimmied up the Maple trees; turning over a rock, he watched in horror as some creepy *thing* with no eyes scuttled under the earth. Lost in this limitless wonder, time had no direction or purpose. School was not high on Rico's priority list. So they held him back.

He ran up the school steps, down the hall, quietly opening and closing the heavy door to his classroom, excited to tell Jane he had once again escaped Seth. He tiptoed over to his seat and sat down. Mrs. March was writing the morning lessons on the blackboard. Without turning around she said, "Rico, please take off your coat and galoshes and join the rest of us." The whole class laughed. Humiliation once again.

The first time this happened was during the first grade. Distracted by her soap operas, his stepmother had neglected to wash his clothes the previous night, sending him off to school zipped up in his one-piece snowsuit and nothing else. When his first grade teacher asked him to remove the suit, Rico replied sheepishly and with hesitation.

"I can't, Mrs. Winters."

"And why in heavens not?" Mrs. Winters asked.

"I'm only wearing underpants."

The class erupted in cackles that shamed him and would continue to fester in his heart through the children's daily taunts and painful reminders. Another reason he didn't like school.

Now he walked heavy-footed to the back of the classroom, hung up his coat and peeled off his boots and mittens. Before sitting down he warmed his hands on the crackling, paint-chipped radiator. He hated that transitional feeling when his finger tips began to thaw out—from icy numbness to fire-hot pins and needles. He had to rattle his hands vigorously in the air to flee the discomfort.

The forth graders sat in groups of four, desks facing each other. Two boys and two girls. Mrs. March had told the children she was 'experimental.'

Jane sat absorbed in her book. Rico sat down next to Mario and immediately whispered toward Jane, "I escaped..." but Jane looked up annoyed, finger to lips for him to hush.

“Rico!” Mrs. March spoke with understandable impatience. “Please quit disturbing the class. Don’t make me say it twice.”

He opened his reader but couldn’t concentrate. Instead, he sat quietly studying Jane’s pretty face, his favorite thing to do lately. Her eyelashes blinked twice every time she turned a page from her novel, *The Boy Who Never Cries*. Next to her elbow, a stack of old favorite and recently published Dr. Seuss awaited her nimble fingers and curiosity. She was an avid consumer of books.

Rico wished he was as smart as Jane. Yes, he loved smart girls. His stepmother never let him live down his first grade failure. “I’m so embarrassed,” she repeated. “What will my relatives in Curaçao think now? They’re all successful. Not one of them failed in school. I come from a family of educated people. *Qué vergüenza.*”

Rico wanted to be educated too. In school, he had grasped at letters and fumbled with numbers; but all those symbols appeared to be meaninglessly identical, contorted stick figures, similar to the little creatures he scratched and scribbled in his drawing book. He preferred Egyptian words because they looked like pictures he could remember.

Winter light filtered in through the tall bare windows. It cast a smooth and soothing ray over everything and settled on desktops and books and Jane’s fair complexion. He wanted to fall forever into her delicate translucence.

Everyone in his family had dark features: olive skin, brown eyes, black hair. From the first moment Rico had entered kindergarten, five chilly years ago, and saw all those fair-skinned children, boys and girls alike, he thought he had arrived in some enchanted land. Also, on every statue or stained-glass window of the church he attended Sundays, the Holy Virgin had blue eyes.

Jane’s curls caught the light beams in their path and twirled them round like a baton. He could see clearly the tiny peach fuzz above her lip, as barely perceptible as Horton hearing a Who. He longed to inhabit her *mysterious* world.

“Drop your pencil under your desk,” Mario whispered in Rico’s ear. He demonstrated by dropping his own. “Go ahead, just pretend you dropped it. I’ll meet you under the desks.”

Rico was ready for any new adventure. He dropped his stubby red pencil, his favorite, and crawled under his desk to pick it up. Mario was already languishing comfortably on his belly, propped up on his elbows, palms folded under his chin, supporting his head. Excitedly, Rico joined him in posture and composure. It was comforting to be here after this morning’s disturbing dream and his recurring showdowns with nightmare Seth. He wanted to remain under his desk forever. Mario tapped him on the shoulder and pointed toward a pair of blue suede loafers. Rico recognized Jane’s familiar shoes. Then her burgundy leggings. His eyes traveled up those thickly knitted stockings to just above the knee, where the lacy hem of her dress began. And, where light had no dominion, his eyes encountered a fortress of impenetrable darkness. *Mysterious*, he thought, like the robins’ nest. And a little *scary*.

"Where are Mario and Rico?" Mrs. March asked with a stern lack of surprise.

"They're under their desks looking up my dress," the precocious Jane called out, not looking up from her book.

"Get back in your seats this instant," Mrs. March shouted. "Shall I call the principal again, like last week? Why can't you boys keep the seat of your pants glued to the seat of your chair?"

Rico and Mario both hit the backs of their heads on the desks' undersides as they leaped again into their seats, still rubbing their noggins. Jane stared directly at Rico, then broke into an unrepentant grin.

"Jane, don't be so *descriptive*. Be a lady. There are other children with sensitive ears." Mrs. March cast a chilly shadow over Rico while all eyes uncomfortably touched him. "Apologize to Jane for your inappropriate and rude behavior."

"Sorry, Jane," both boys mumbled in unison.

"I expect you to act like gentlemen in my classroom and throughout the rest of your life. You will spend the remainder of the day writing: *I am a gentleman and will act like one.*"

Sadly, they sat in their seats sharpening their broken pencil points and quietly burdening the pages of their notebooks with their contrition.

While Rico and Mario toiled, the rest of the class got rewarded for their good behavior with a finger painting session, to end the day. At one point Mrs. March stepped out into the hall to talk to the principal. The back of Rico's head still hurt from the banging; but now, along his nape, there was the added sensation of hairs standing on end. He tried not to think about the principal.

Jane was at the center of the solar system around which he orbited. He enjoyed her company. At first he hadn't noticed her, but when Mario pointed her out as the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, Rico saw nothing else but Jane. A heavy lump lodged in his heart when Mario said, "I'm going to ask her to be my girl." Her mother was barely around, placing the burden of raising Jane on her older sisters. They were always talking about their boyfriends in great detail and with giddy excitement. So when Mario asked, she thought she'd give it a try. When Jane accepted, Rico thought Mario was a very lucky boy to have such a girl; Mario had not failed the first grade; Mario was successful.

It was only after she read him stories from the Land of Egypt that Rico really fell in love with Jane—though he was all thumbs around her. Too shy to approach her directly, he tried creative ways to capture her attention. In the fall, maple leaves the color of robins' breasts dropped from the trees and settled as gently as feathers across the vast belly of Canada. Rico waited for Jane on the brick retaining wall that girthed the school. To either side of the stairwell, a large stone finial ball rested like two planets in alignment. He had learned to run along the wall-top at high speed toward the banisters. This gave him

enough momentum to span the stairs in a perfect arc. Briefly stepping onto the first finial for extra thrust, he would lunge and land balanced and solid on the opposite globe—a man at the top of his world.

Jane and her girlfriends gamboled out giggling and skipping down the stairs in short-quick sparrow-hops. Rico had timed it just right. He blasted over their heads, a fearless astronaut, alighting softly and steady on the globe's stone surface. This startled Jane out of her giggles. Her blue eyes smacked him with all her annoyance, knocking him off his perch. He landed flat on his back, saved only by a cushion of maple leaves. Jane looked down at him over the banister; an expression of concern in her voice quickly turned into a stern lecture. "There's many ways to impress a girl, Rico." She had overheard this line from an older sister. "Scaring her socks off isn't one of them."

Rico stared up stunned and embarrassed.

In the beginning she intimidated Rico with her cold shoulder and smart words. But he had impressed her before the whole class with his puppet theater performance. These days she noticed him more often; when she talked to him, there was warmth and sweetness in her voice.

Jane had inspired him to create the show's plot. Earlier in the year she had read to him the story of Isis and Osiris. An indisputably jealous Set (the Lord of Chaos—and Foreigners) killed Osiris and then dismembered him, tossing his head and limbs into the Nile river and across the Dead Lands. But Isis, his wife, gathered up the scattered parts and refashioned Osiris into a whole person. Rico thought Osiris had better luck than Humpty Dumpty or the robins' eggs. Osiris was lucky like Mario.

He was never fully able to retain all those odd and confusing Egyptian names; which animal head belonged on which god—was it Horus or Set who had *una cabeza de pájaro*, a bird head? But there were many other distractions. Mainly, his mind was focused on more interesting details: first, her dreamy lips would form-fit around syllables—O-SI-RIS; then her mouth would launch a little boatload of vowels and consonants that rowed merrily, merrily down the stream toward his delighted ears.

Rico confided everything to his stepmom. Except for Seth. He didn't want to be a fink. His shin ached thinking about it. So when he discovered Jane, he couldn't contain his excitement. His stepmother got an earful of the girl, illustrated in cross section like an anatomy book. He described the combustible blue of her eyes, bluer than the robins' eggs; the shape of her pixie nose and cheeks flush with rosiness from skipping rope in the schoolyard; the tiny dimple in her chin; and finally, the golden locks—every curl on Jane's head seemed to have its own unique name in Rico's imagination, as if her bouncy hairdo was a kennel of little puppies.

¿Dígame, niño Rico. No preferirías una chiquita bonita española? his stepmother suggested. When Rico didn't respond, she repeated in English, "Wouldn't you prefer to have a crush on a nice Spanish girl?" And then upon further speculation, "Or even, an Italian one?"

Rico's dad was an engineer and a man of few words.

"Opposites attract," he said.

Then his father proceeded to help Rico with the overall puppet stage architecture, mechanics and construction. Everything needed to be solid, bolted or braced. He wanted to manufacture a meat grinder, so his dad showed him how to build the body and hopper from cardboard and bend clothes hanger wire for a handle.

Rico crafted a *good* and *bad* puppet. The *good* puppet looked a lot like himself. The *bad* puppet had a hawk's head.

His stepmother helped him roll toilet tissue squares into cylindrical shapes stuffed with wadded toilet paper and tied at the ends to create a link chain of tissue wiener dogs that trailed across the kitchen floor by bedtime.

After brushing his teeth and praying to the Holy Mother, he lay wide awake looking up at the ceiling, constructing the puppet plot in his restless mind; imagining how Jane would react to each scene; listening to the crickets outside his window scrape their wings against the evening.

He needed a production assistant, so he asked Mario if he would collaborate. Mario, privileged enough to have a private art tutor, could draw circles around Rico. But Mario could only copy. Rico had imagination and original ideas.

The near perfect show did have some hiccups. At one point, the hawk head fell off the bad puppet's body during the climax and Rico was afraid he had ruined the performance. But the class, not knowing his intention, burst into laughter. Encouraged, Rico quickly stuck the head back on and tossed the bad puppet into the meat grinder. Mario turned the handle. When the toilet paper links spit out the front of the grinder and kept on rolling, the class cheers were uncontrollable.

Then, another hiccup. The delicate white tissue tore and the links stopped producing. Now Rico thought for sure he was finished. The class went silent as he quickly grabbed the end of the broken thread from the feeding tray and pushed it through the meat grinder opening. The pause had created suspense and when the second batch of wieners spilled forward, there was no end to the class mirth.

The show got a standing ovation from the entire fourth grade and Mrs. March said it was the best performance she had ever seen at school. Rico had kept his eyes on Jane the whole time. He was overjoyed when he caught glimpses of Jane smiling at the unanticipated, her eyes widened through sudden illumination.

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In the hall, Rico could still hear Mrs. March just out of earshot, talking with the principal.

“What's a spic?” he asked Jane, earnestly.

She considered the question for a moment before looking up from her book. “A Spic is a bad word. You shouldn't ever use it.” She looked at him now with a kind face. “I don't care where you come

from or the color of your skin. But a *spic* is no different than a *wop* or a *redneck* if he drops a pencil to look up a girl's dress."

Her words drove that point painfully into his chest. It ashamed him. "But Mario drops his pencil all the time," Rico said, in bold defense.

"Yes. And I don't like it. I only put up with it because he's my boyfriend. You're not." She said this sharply and coldly, returning to her book.

Rico was quiet. His eyes filled with an embarrassment of tears, but he managed to control the flood. "I'm sorry, Jane. I won't do it again."

"I know you won't," Jane said, continuing to read. "You're a nice boy." Now the tears gushed down his cheeks, no longer under his will. A mysterious tingle stirred in his heart, as if his heart could smile. Her words continued to echo sweetly in his mind until the bell rang at the end of the day, breaking the spell. *You're a nice boy.* A nice boy. No girl had ever said that to him.

As soon as the bell rang the class rose at once and ran for their boots and coats. This warm winter armor served as an exoskeleton. While Rico was getting dressed, still in a state of rapture, a few children from another class came rushing in and whispered in his ear.

"Seth's out to get you."

"He's gathered a posse."

"There's a man at every gate."

Rico tried to make his exit through the school's front doors, a path he had never used. The bottleneck of escaping children, all rushing out at once, slowed his flight. But this only helped arouse in him more hyper-vigilance to spot Seth. No sign of him so far. Gradually though, he noticed, among the waiting parents, the eyes of some unfamiliar seventh graders searching randomly into the exiting stampede.

One of the strange boys pointed toward him. "There he is! Seth said he had a red hood."

Rico pulled a 180 and re-entered the school. He tried two more gates. Both guarded with Seth's boys. He panicked, feeling trapped at last.

But he wasn't a quitter, or a sissy. He was always able to pull another rabbit out of his hat. In kindergarten he used to beat up the other kids for making fun of him. When the principal complained to his father, his dad removed his belt and gave Rico a beating so severe his stepmother had to scream for him to stop, as her stepson had passed out. "*Dios mío, está muerto, lo mataste.* You killed him dead." His father had moments of blind rage. Although those occasions were rare, Rico remembered each one and it changed him forever. He didn't like pain and avoided it at all cost. He never knew when his dad would hit him because sometimes Rico would do something that made his dad laugh and other times a similar act would make his dad angry enough to whip him. But after that harsh beating, Rico never hit another boy. Now, he only called them names. His father was forever remorseful.

“I wish I hadn’t punished you, Rico, for beating up other kids. Now you’re a quitter. I’ve turned you into a sissy.”

Not accepting defeat, Rico had developed another strategy. He had learned the art of evasion through speed and zigzag. He now returned to the main entrance, took a deep breath and flew out the large front doors, leaping over the smaller children. Outside, emerging from the crowd like a desperate squid, a number of disembodied arms with extended fingers reached for him. He dodged them effortlessly. Using a single hand for leverage, he hurdled over a snow covered stone Phoenix. No one expected this upstart’s slick trick, so he carved a clear path to freedom, darting between bumpers, down the car-heavy street. Waiting on the children, old Studebakers and Chevy station wagons with rusted fenders idled in the salt and snow. They released clouds of rising exhaust that clung to the air and dangled rows of icicles from their metal frames like so many candy canes.

Confident now, Rico expected his flight would lead to freedom; but he met with disillusion when he encountered a second wave of Seth’s bad boys. He glared at them defiantly and zigzagged past their lumbering movements, darting left-right or right-left, merely inches from a mittened paw ready to clamp down on him. The closer a mitt approached and missed, through his skillful footwork, the cockier Rico grew from the challenge.

His body prickled head to toe with a strange new awakening. He owned the elements. Expelling and sucking up the frozen air, he felt the warm snot worm its way out of his nose and linger in suspension, before a cold slime slinked back up his nostrils. He smelled the car fumes up against his own muggy sweat. He almost tasted the salt and slush that garnished the road. He accepted the grimy snowbanks to either side, fused with dross and rudimentary dead things. He measured the scale of his insignificance against the forces that acted upon him. The street opened up before him and he smiled when he noticed an isolated alley that would carry him home, a free man...

A jolt stopped him, body and mind, in his tracks. While scraping past the last sentinel, Rico had ducked extra low for a daring zigzag, forcing his hood to fly up. That’s when Seth’s hand snagged its crimson edge and brought him down.

“Hold him still ... but don’t hurt him. He’s all mine.” Seth calmly unbuttoned a baggy jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Barbs of red hair spanned in all directions as his nostrils widened to covet more air.

Rico looked up at the anger and meanness living in Seth’s eyes and he saw Mr. White’s face as Mario had described him. He didn’t hate Seth now. They locked eyes and Rico surrendered finally to snow and defeat. The first blow connected with his ribs. His padded coat helped absorb some of the shock but it knocked the wind out of him. Then a second kick to his thigh and a third to his shoulder. With each boot, Seth added a few words for clarity.

“Told you I’d clock you, spic.” Bam. “The baby robins would o’ never survived.” Whack. “I saw a hawk kill the mother.” Thump. “So I smashed the eggs an’ hatchlings ... Plucked those squawkers out o’ their misery.” Crunch.

Seth’s boot came down hard on Rico’s nose knocking him unconscious.
“Oh, no,” someone said, “you killed him dead.”

Rico didn’t know how long he had been out cold. But a chorus of voices helped revive him.

“Is he still alive?”

“Who did this?”

“Seth and his Snarks.”

“That Seth! Bet he’ll get the boot, right back to reform school.”

“Oh my God, it’s Rico. And he’s bleeding.”

The loud ringing in his ears and the throbbing in his legs and arms and head clamored for attention, individually and all at once, and felt both intimately near and detached from his body, as if the pain was coming from severed limbs tossed yards away. Slowly his eyes opened to a crowd of people towered around him, casting shadows and blocking the sun. A girl bent down onto her knees next to him. At first he only saw a pair of burgundy stockings. Somehow, this familiar vision comforted him. Then, directing his gaze upward, he saw Jane’s radiant face. It began to snow and he thought he could see her face on every snowflake. Her fur hood surrounded her blond curls and the intertwining filaments of fur and curl absorbed the dim light from the sky and magnified it a million times in Rico’s eyes like the rays that glowed around the face of the Holy Virgin, or Isis, goddess of Egypt. Jane pulled off a mitten. A delicate white handkerchief, lace-trimmed, emerged from within. The back of her pinkish hand had red blotches from the cold and her forearm, disappearing up her coat sleeve, shivered under a covering of goose bumps. Holding the white kerchief, she reached down and dabbed at the blood that dripped from Rico’s nose into the snow. He thought he saw the shadow of a hawk soaring above her head as she spoke kindly. But he couldn’t quite make sense of her words.

In his hazy mind, he thought he heard angels chanting a harmonious litany that filled his heart with mystery. *Pobre niño Rico, you’re not a spic. Not a spic. You’re a nice boy. A nice boy.*

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Seth got his revenge. And that satisfied him. Over time, the two boys worked out their childhood differences and became friends. Because of the disparity in age, they didn’t hang out, but whenever Rico got into trouble Seth stepped in to protect him like an older brother.

Seth never apologized for the beating. A week later, though, he showed up at school with a hawk's tail feather, long and straight and white with light-red bands along the tip. The kids gathered round. "It belongs to a mother hawk," he said. "The one that killed the robin mom." Seth twirled the feather between his fingers. "The hawk sat proud at the top of a pine watchin' 'er last fledgling leave the nest. I saw this feather drop from 'er body and float to the ground. Like she was tryin' to lighten 'er load a bit after all 'er hard work. I saved it for a special occasion." Surprising everyone, he gave it to Rico as a peace offering. While he handed over the feather he ruffled Rico's hair playfully so that it looked more like his own messy hairdo. All laughed. Rico laughed too. On his part, also surprising everyone, Rico apologized to Seth for calling him names. And for being a fink.

(Afterword)

In putting the pieces together, based on what he told me, this is how I remember Rico, my second boyfriend. It didn't work out too well with Mario, who was dull and crude and clueless—didn't know how to listen to a girl. Rico weighed every word I said and absorbed every minute of my nine-year-old history. And Rico confessed everything about his own life and how he felt about me. He whispered sweet boy-nothings in my ear and he was one of the most sensitive boys I've ever met—more attentive than the men I now date. He made me laugh a lot. In hindsight I think the poor kid had ADHD. But who knew back then. He couldn't focus on anything except art—and me. I think I was his Ritalin. I had a calming effect on him. And he taught me to look at the visual world in a novel way. We spent two remarkable years together through the forth and fifth grades and part of the sixth. A loose parental supervision guided the quasi innocence of the 50's. So we got to spend lots of alone time together, especially during the summer months when our parents were working and the days were long. We would walk for hours down the railroad tracks talking and holding hands. He never stopped looking at me. He loved me unconditionally. My thoughts would drift away or my concentration would be focused on a story I was relating and when my attention returned, there were Rico's eyes fixed on me as if I were some enchanted character just emerged from the pages of a fairytale. This doting never irritated me. On the contrary, it made me feel deeply wanted. Something I never got from my mother, who was always somewhere else instead of nurturing her daughters. Rico and I did everything children that age are allowed to do—trying not to break too many rules. And we thought we would be together always.

Until my mother decided to move the family far away to an all white neighborhood. But not before giving Rico a dressing-down, her false lashes batting at his face, "You're not allowed to see my daughter anymore." Rico's mouth opened in shock; his tiny castrated voice whispered a single word, "Why?" My mother stared as he averted teary eyes, "Because you're brown." Rico couldn't make sense of her meaning, but he understood her tone and it made him cry. Right in front of me.

It broke my heart.